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Classified By: CDA Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) Promoting democratic reform and respect for human rights is our first Mission Strategic Plan goal. Our approach to promoting human rights involves a broad range of mission offices using a variety of means and methods to promote the Freedom Agenda. Over the last year, Embassy officials met frequently with opposition leaders and civil society activists, monitored several politically sensitive trials, and visited hunger strikers. When meeting with host government officials, the Ambassador and others advocated for reforms relating to freedom of expression and freedom of association, in addition to raising specific cases of concern. To provide activists with a safe space for debate and discussion, the Embassy hosts a monthly roundtable. Through the International Visitor and Leadership Program (IVLP) many Tunisians are sent to the United States on programs focusing on rule of law, political participation, and human rights. Several political reform oriented projects were funded through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). These actions have emboldened civil society activists to continue campaigning for meaningful reform in Tunisia. End Summary.

Meetings with Opposition Leaders
and Civil Society Activists

12. (C/NF) The Embassy has maintained its strong relationship with civil society activist through frequent contact. For example, the Ambassador and Emboffs had long advocated for the release of jailed attorney Mohamed Abbou, who was incarcerated in 2005 for "defaming the judicial system" after he posted articles on the Internet critical of Tunisian prisons. We raised Abbou's case with GOT officials, in addition to meeting regularly with Abbou's wife Samia. Since his July 2007 release, Abbou has represented defendants in several politically sensitive cases, as well as forging relationships with Tunisia's preeminent opposition activists. His wife has obtained her law degree, and plans to go into practice for herself. Both Abbous have the potential to become future leaders, and thanks to the Embassy's past support, they are open to dialogue with us. Maintaining close contact with activists like the Abbous also allows the Embassy to receive timely first-hand information when they or

other activists are harassed by security forces.

¶3. (C) The ongoing problems of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) has long been a topic of concern for international human rights groups and activists. Despite various attempts at mediation, a drawn-out legal battle has virtually paralyzed all activities of the LTDH, the Arab world's oldest human rights league. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, have met with representatives of both sides in the LTDH conflict and the GOT to encourage reconciliation (Ref G). Due to our dialogue with all the parties involved, we are able to obtain accurate current information regarding this ever-evolving situation.

¶4. (C) In addition to meeting with independent activists, we routinely meet with the full range of opposition parties, some closer to the government than others. This contact is particularly important in the lead up to the 2009 presidential and legislative elections (Ref E). Thanks to established relationships with the USG, opposition party officials shared advance information regarding their plans for 2009, and explained the motivations behind their elections strategy. This allowed the Embassy to develop concrete proposals for elections programming, based on civil society's concerns. The Ambassador has also urged senior GOT leaders to take specific steps toward liberalization, such as adopting less stringent candidacy laws (Ref B).

¶5. (C) To provide Tunisian activists with a safe space for debate where they can speak without fear of having their meeting broken up by the police, the Embassy hosts a monthly human rights roundtable. As many activists have difficulty

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obtaining travel documents, the Embassy has brought the outside world to them through the use of digital video conferences (DVCs). Recent guest speakers (via DVC) include Steve Morrison of the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara of the Mauritanian Independent Elections Commission. Participants, ranging from journalists to lawyers and opposition party members, said the roundtables allowed them to take away concrete lessons about democracy promotion that could potentially be applied in Tunisia.

Justice is Blind?

¶6. (C/NF) By monitoring politically sensitive trials, and encouraging other diplomatic missions to do the same, we have sent a strong message about the importance the international community attaches to fair trials. Some of the trials attended over the last year include the defamation trial of a journalist, the potentially politically motivated trial of another journalist for allegedly insulting a police officer, and the libel trial of editors of an opposition newspaper.

¶7. (C/NF) Tunisian civil society activists often make the case that restrictions on freedom of association greatly limit the number of ways they can advocate for reform. As rallies or sit-ins are made impossible by a heavy police presence, many Tunisians have turned to hunger strikes. EmbOffs have visited hunger strikers to demonstrate support for the principles of freedom of association or freedom of expression about which they were protesting. We have been careful, however, not to endorse the tactic. Strikers have commented that EmbOffs' visits, often the only visits by diplomats, have sent a strong signal of the USG's commitment to human rights and helped raise the visibility of their concerns, ultimately pressuring the GOT to broker a resolution. This was especially true when the Ambassador visited the Secretary General and the former Secretary General of the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) while they were on a hunger strike in August 2007 (Ref H) protesting restrictions on freedom of association. PolOff

also visited Mohamed Nouri and Slim Boukhdhir when they were on a hunger strike to protest restrictions on their right to travel. PolOff later visited Boukhdhir's family when he launched a hunger strike from prison after being arrested shortly after he ended the previous hunger strike). Tunisia's latest hunger strike was conducted by one of the writers and the editor-in-chief for the PDP's Arabic-weekly al-Mowqif to protest restrictions on freedom of the press; it concluded on May 10.

¶8. (C) During meetings with high level government officials, the Ambassador consistently raises freedom and human rights concerns, especially those relating to freedom of expression and freedom of association. The Ambassador and Embassy officials have met several times with the President of the governmental Higher Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties (HCHR), Moncer Rouissi, to raise issues ranging from the prison conditions of incarcerated journalist Slim Boukhdhir to the LTDH crisis (Ref D). Such issues have also been raised with a variety of other GOT officials, including the Foreign Minister and several of President Ben Ali's closest advisors (Ref B).

Mutual Understanding and Cooperation

¶9. (C) Another method the Embassy uses to promote political reform and human rights is the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). Four young attorneys who participated in a 2007 Single Country Program IVLP on the rule of law reported that the program helped reinforce their understanding of the issue. They explained how it helped them overcome preconceived notions of the U.S., and had made many useful contacts that they hoped to maintain. To foster this relationship, the Embassy hopes to fund a training initiative for the Tunisian Bar Association in conjunction with the American Bar Association. Exchanges focusing on human rights and good governance help introduce up-and-coming leaders to new ideas and tools, which they in turn can share with their colleagues upon their return. The former Secretary General of the PDP has often spoken warmly of his own IVLP (many, many years ago), and the Embassy hopes to send the PDP's current Secretary General to the US on an IVLP in 2008. We are also nominating several journalists on relevant programs to support freedom of expression.

¶10. (SBU) Several political reform oriented projects were funded through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).

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In 2007, MEPI funded a series of roundtables on topics ranging from civil society to American foreign policy. The roundtables featured lively debates among a cross section of prominent Tunisians, and transcripts were subsequently published as inserts in two private newspapers and a weekly magazine. The roundtable series was very well-received, and the Embassy hopes to renew the grant in 2008. The candor of the debate, and the topics themselves, represented something of an opening in the Tunisian media, which has a tendency to self-censor when it comes to sensitive topics.

Comment

¶11. (C) Reform in Tunisia has been slow and uneven. GOT leaders have been reluctant to engage in a meaningful dialogue about reform, and react defensively when specific cases or issues are raised. Raising individual cases, however, has proven important to getting the attention of GOT leaders. It is also important that we coordinate with like-minded countries, something we routinely do at the Ambassadorial and working levels. A clear, consistent message on political reform, both in Washington and Tunisia, is essential to fostering a vibrant civil society and an open

democratic society. Given its history of women's rights and religious tolerance, Tunisia has the potential to be a model for the region, but unless the GOT takes steps to address societal discontent about limited political participation, it risks undermining the progress Tunisia has made. End Comment.
DESJARDINS